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SUBJECT: THE "PESSOPTIMISTS": SYRIANS SPECULATE ON THE FUTURE OF U.S.-SYRIAN RELATIONS

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: Syrian political analyst Dr. Marwan Kabalan spoke February 28 at a prominent Damascus venue on the current hot topic of Syrian-American relations. Focusing on the anticipated approach of the Obama Administration to foreign affairs in general more than on the Syrian American relationship, Dr. Kabalan alternated between cynicism and guarded optimism. His principal themes were: Addressing the global economic crisis will be the paramount philosophy of the Obama administration; the U.S. will take a more pragmatic approach to the Middle East, and there are some signs of improvement in the U.S. attitude to Syria. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Syrian political analyst, political science professor, and former Fulbrighter Dr. Marwan Kabalan spoke on "Syrian-American Relations: At Ease?!" on February 28 at the Syrian International Academy, a media training center which hosts a wide variety of such events. The lecture, sponsored by the Arab Institute of International Affairs and Diplomatic Studies, attracted Arab and foreign ambassadors, former Minister of Information Mahdi Dakhlalla, and assorted academics and journalists. PAO represented the mission.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS WILL DRIVE EVERYTHING

13. (U) Dr. Kabalan observed that while it is still too early to discern Obama's foreign policy direction, all U.S. administrations have an overarching "philosophy" which shapes their foreign policy approaches. He asserted that the world economic crisis will define the new Administration's philosophy, heavily coloring U.S. policy towards the Middle East and elsewhere. The U.S. will give priority to those countries which can help it out of the economic crisis, Kabalan believes, in particular the Far East and the Gulf countries, with their huge cash reserves and sovereign wealth funds.

U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY WILL BE MORE PRAGMATIC

14. (U) Kabalan described the two main pillars of U.S. foreign policy as Israel and oil, but argued that the new Administration will look at the Middle East in less ideological, more pragmatic terms. Israel will not be the "spoiled child" it was under George Bush, he said, and it will not be able to do everything it wants. Although Obama is trying to reduce the influence of lobbyists, and the Jewish lobby will have less influence, Kabalan said, lobbying groups will remain influential.

POSITIVE SIGNS BUT WHAT'S THE PRICE?

15. (U) Dr. Kabalan credited the mercantile, Protestant mentality of Americans for a "tit-for-tat" policy that expects Syria to make a concession in return for the return of the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus. He said that while U.S. Syria policy is still under review, there are some positive indicators: a) Dennis Ross, who is "unpopular in our region," did not get the Middle East portfolio but instead ended up as "a mere consultant to the Secretary;" and b) there is a "clear delay" in the appointment of Jeff Feltman as Assistant Secretary (and he may not even be named to the position). Kabalan added that Ambassador Feltman acted in Lebanon as "more than an ambassador" [i.e. high-handedly].

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE/DIVERGENCE

¶16. (U) In remarks which echoed recent SARG comments to Congressional visitors, Dr. Kabalan outlined those areas where the U.S. and Syria could agree: a) the peace process, in which the Obama administration will be more involved; b) Iraq, where the U.S. and Syrian both want to see stability; and c) combating terrorism, though the U.S. and Syria need to agree upon a common definition of what terrorism is. He named only one point of divergence: a) the U.S. "problem" with Hamas and Hezbollah, "resistance movements" which the U.S. considers terrorist organizations.

IT COULD NOT GET WORSE...

¶17. (U) Dr. Kabalan opined that in its relations with Syria, the U.S. has emphasized the negative over the positive; even the recent Feltman-Moustafa meeting was more about disagreements. "A successful dialogue should not start like this," he commented, adding: "We will get nowhere that way." However, he noted that "Even if Obama does nothing, U.S.-Syrian relations can't get any worse." [NOTE: There was no indication that Dr. Kabalan had any knowledge of the actual substance of the A/Assistant Secretary's meeting with the Syrian Ambassador. END NOTE]

WHAT DOES SYRIA WANT FROM THE U.S.?

¶18. Asked by a journalist what Syria hopes to gain from having a dialogue with the U.S., Dr. Kabalan responded that it is important for Syria and the US to improve relations. U.S. involvement would help Syria reach a peace deal; better relations with the U.S. would also reduce pressure on Syria. Asked about reported comments from Vice President Shar'a that Syria would not embark upon dialogue with the U.S. unless the Syria Accountability Act (SAA) was lifted, Kabalan responded: "The SAA is a complex and prickly subject which does affect Syria. It should not be a barrier to resuming our negotiations. If a peace treaty is signed, then all these subjects can be dealt with."

¶19. COMMENT (SBU): The level and amount participation in this event, as in a similar lecture given by Ambassador Imad Moustafa last week, demonstrated not only the intense and hopeful interest with which influential Syrians are following changes in the U.S.-Syrian relationship but also their apprehension that it may not improve. Asked to comment, PAO emphasized the U.S. commitment to finding a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. desire for a stronger, broader relationship between Syria and the U.S., and the importance of people-to-people ties. After the lecture, the former Minister of Information pulled PAO aside and repeated several times: "The Syrian President told me himself that he would trust an American a hundred times more than any European." Cynical and pessimistic though many of them are, Syrians eagerly anticipate any possible uptick in the relationship. END COMMENT

CONNELLY